United Nations A/70/432

General Assembly

Distr.: General
16 October 2015

Original: English

Seventieth session
Agenda item 137
Pattern of conferences

Pattern of conferences

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

I. Introduction

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/70/122). In addition, the Committee had before it the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2015 (A/70/32), which includes the text of a draft resolution on the pattern of conferences in annex I. During its consideration of the report, the Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarification, concluding with written responses received on 28 September 2015.

2. The report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 69/250 and other relevant mandates, contains information on meetings management, integrated global management, matters relating to documentation and publications and matters relating to translation and interpretation.

II. Meetings management

3. The Secretary-General indicates in his report that the overall utilization factor for meetings with interpretation of a core sample of bodies that met in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in 2014 was 86 per cent, an improvement of 4 per cent compared with 2013, due to fewer cancellations and less time lost owing to late starts and early conclusions, as well as more successful reassignments (A/70/122, para. 5). The Advisory Committee recalls that the utilization factor was 84 per cent in 2012 and 85 per cent in both 2011 and 2010 (A/69/527, para. 3). **The Committee notes that the overall utilization factor for meetings with interpretation of a core sample of bodies that met in the four duty stations was 86 per cent, which**

15-18028 (E) 191015

Please recycle

is above the benchmark of 80 per cent, and also represents an improvement in the overall utilization factor.

4. The Advisory Committee notes that the report of the Secretary-General provides information concerning the utilization factors based on the number of programmed versus actual meetings held. In that regard, the Committee recalls that it had requested that future budget submissions include information on utilization factors based on actual occupancy against existing full capacity for all Secretariat conference facilities (A/69/527, para. 5). Upon enquiry, the Committee was provided with preliminary statistics showing the utilization factor for New York based on actual occupancy against total capacity and was informed that statistics for other duty stations were unavailable. **The Committee reiterates its view that future reports on the pattern of conferences should include information on utilization factors for all four duty stations based on actual occupancy against total capacity, which would provide a more accurate picture of the actual utilization of conference facilities. The Committee expects that the information would also include a breakdown of utilization by each individual conference and meeting room.**

5. With respect to the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the report of the Secretary-General states that a competitive pricing structure has been introduced as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 69/250 (A/70/122, para. 19). In that regard, the Advisory Committee recalls its recommendation that the break-even formula for ECA of a 50-50 balance between income generation and costs should include indirect costs in order to ensure full costing and risk assessment (A/68/567, para. 9, and A/69/527, para. 6). Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that the pricing structure reflected full cost recovery, with a 50-50 balance between income generation and costs in terms of hosting non-ECA events and extrabudgetary conferences. The Committee was also informed that the pricing element included a 5 per cent service charge on top of the overall charges to cover for administrative costs such as work hours spent in organizing external or extrabudgetary events. **The Committee is of the view that the Secretary-General should provide clear and detailed information in future reports on the break-even formula for ECA, as well as for the other duty stations, which should clearly show that all costs, both direct and indirect, are included.** The Committee makes further observations on the matter in its report on the progress in the construction of new office facilities at the Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa and update on the renovation of conference facilities, including Africa Hall.

6. Paragraph 20 of the report of the Secretary-General indicates that, after the completion of the capital master plan, meeting room capacity has been fully restored with the addition of two medium-sized rooms and a small room. The Advisory Committee's observations and recommendations on the capital master plan project are contained in its report on the thirteenth annual progress report on the implementation of the capital master plan, in which the Committee notes that the capital master plan is an active and ongoing project. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that the Secretariat did not expect the requests for the seventy-first session of the General Assembly to be as numerous as the seventieth session, and would programme events to the extent allowed by the availability of facilities. **The Committee notes the Secretariat's assurances regarding proper planning to accommodate events related to the seventy-first session of the General Assembly.**

7. The report of the Secretary-General also describes accessibility services provided by the Division of Conference Management at the United Nations Office at Geneva to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other panels as mandated (A/70/122, para. 21). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management used special software to publish verbatim records of the General Assembly, the Security Council and other documents to ensure that documents were accessible for persons with visual disabilities. **The Committee encourages the Secretary-General to apply additional measures to increase the accessibility of all materials on the United Nations website to persons with disabilities and to ensure that guidelines on accessibility are being applied.**

III. Integrated global management

8. The report of the Secretary-General states that, in response to General Assembly resolutions 68/251 and 69/250, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Directors-General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi have agreed upon a delineation of their responsibilities concerning conference management policies, operations and resource utilization. In addition, revisions to the Secretary-General's bulletins that define the organization of the Department and of the Offices have been proposed and are currently under review (A/70/122, para. 24). **The Advisory Committee welcomes those developments and trusts that the revised bulletins will be promulgated expeditiously.**

9. Table 6 of the report of the Secretary-General sets out the notional savings achieved through the implementation of the integrated global management rule, indicating that in 2014 notional savings amounted to approximately $1.7 million, representing an increase from the notional savings in 2013 of approximately $1.3 million. **The Advisory Committee welcomes the increased efficiencies achieved under the integrated global management rule.**

IV. Matters relating to documentation and publications

Multilingualism

10. The Secretary-General states in his report that, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 69/250, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management was recently appointed as the new Coordinator for Multilingualism in order to harmonize the measures implemented, to propose strategies to ensure that United Nations linguistic practices are in keeping with the various resolutions relating to multilingualism and to serve as a focal point for proposals and requests related to multilingualism throughout the Secretariat (A/70/122, paras. 44 and 45). The Advisory Committee was informed that the new Coordinator intended to initiate consultations with multiple stakeholders on those issues. **The Committee expects the Secretary-General to inform the General Assembly, during its consideration of the present report, of the activities related to multilingualism that have been undertaken since the adoption of its resolution 69/250 on 29 December 2014, including the activities of the new Coordinator since his appointment on 30 June 2015.**

11. **The Advisory Committee also recalls that the General Assembly, in its resolution 69/250, requested the Secretary-General to redouble his efforts to ensure full parity among the six official languages. The Committee trusts that the Secretary-General will strengthen his efforts on multilingualism in accordance with the resolution and report on those efforts in his subsequent reports.**

Digitization

12. With respect to the digitization of documents, the report of the Secretary-General indicates that, of an estimated 17 million paper documents in United Nations repositories, mostly from the pre-digital era, some 3 million have been identified as particularly important and in urgent need of digitization. The report further states that, as at April 2015, 360,000 documents had been digitized, catalogued and made available, representing some 11 per cent of the estimated total (A/70/122, para. 48). The Advisory Committee was informed upon enquiry that the Dag Hammarskjöld Library decided which documents were to be prioritized for digitization, and accordingly had identified 5 million documents as critical, since they were older documents that were on the verge of disintegration. Upon enquiry as to partnerships with private sector entities on digitization, the Committee was informed that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had not approached the private sector in that regard. **The Committee recalls that the General Assembly, in its resolution 69/250, had requested the Secretary-General to expedite the process of the digitization of important older United Nations documents, in particular those that had been identified as particularly important and in urgent need of digitization.**

13. With regard to digital support of meeting proceedings, the report of the Secretary-General states that responsibility for supporting and further refining the paper-smart concept as a corporate solution has been assigned to the Office of Information and Communications Technology (A/70/122, para. 49). **The Advisory Committee trusts that the Secretary-General will continue to provide information on the implementation of the paper-smart concept in future reports on the pattern of conferences.**

V. Matters relating to translation and interpretation

14. The report of the Secretary-General indicates that competitive examinations for the recruitment of candidates to fill language posts are held as needed, while vacancies arising from anticipated retirements are advertised at least six months in advance in order to ensure the timely completion of the selection process and a smooth succession. The report also describes the outreach programme in partnership with a network of universities, which has recently been expanded to add the King Fahd School of Translation in Tangier, Morocco. In addition, outreach to universities in Africa is continuing under the African project and the assistance of permanent missions has been solicited to identify potential partner universities in other regions, including Central America and the Caribbean. The report states that 56 per cent of the successful examination candidates in 2010-2014 had attended at least one of the universities in the network (A/70/122, paras. 52-56).

15. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, in order to address the high vacancy rate in the French Translation Service at Headquarters, which is due in part to the preference of translators to work at European duty stations, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management has developed a plan which includes the outposting of five translators from the Service at Headquarters to Vienna. **The Advisory Committee notes the continuing high vacancy rates in the language services and recalls its previous observations regarding the importance of outreach initiatives, including expansion of the network of universities, and succession planning (A/69/527, para. 27, and A/68/567, para. 28). The Committee recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to provide in his next report a concrete proposal, including details regarding his plan mentioned above, to address the vacancy situation and succession planning in the language services, particularly in the French Translation Service at Headquarters.**

16. **In addition, the Committee recalls that the General Assembly, in paragraph 125 of its resolution 69/250, requested the Secretary-General to make further concerted efforts to promote outreach programmes, such as traineeships and internships, and to introduce innovative methods to increase awareness of the programmes, including through partnerships with Member States, relevant international organizations and language institutions in all regions, in particular to close the wide gap in Africa and Latin America. The Committee recommends that the Assembly request the Secretary-General to include that information in his next report on the pattern of conferences.**

17. With respect to the translations of written replies to the list of issues arising from the human rights treaty bodies, the Advisory Committee was informed upon enquiry that replies to the list of issues remained unpredictable, as they were not subject to a formal submission deadline and were not limited in length, and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management has had difficulty providing translations of those replies. The Committee was further informed that, within the context of the treaty body strengthening process, the impact of the limitation of the list of issues and the expansion of the list of issues prior to reporting on the required volume of translation remained to be seen. **In that context, the Committee recalls that the General Assembly, in paragraph 1 of its resolution 68/245 A, endorsed the Committee's recommendation that the Assembly instruct the Secretary-General to reinstate the practice of translating written replies to the list of issues arising from the human rights bodies, with immediate effect.**

18. The Advisory Committee requested disaggregated data on the actual workload of the revisers in the translation services in New York, but was provided instead with the general standard daily workload expected of the revisers, which is 4,125 words. **The Committee recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to provide information on the actual workload of the revisers for the six translation services in New York in his next report.**

19. Paragraph 62 of the report of the Secretary-General indicates that the contractual translation rosters are being expanded and clear procedures are being developed to ensure that every individual and institutional contractor on the roster is regularly subject to quality control assessments and feedback, on the basis of standardized criteria, in all six official languages and across the four main duty

stations. Regarding quality control, the Advisory Committee was informed that a common methodology for performing quality control of contractual output across duty stations was being developed, as were common criteria for the inclusion and removal of contractors from the roster. **The Committee trusts that the common methodology and criteria on quality control of contractual translators will be finalized promptly.**